Six principles for media education

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What is media education for? At the school level, we hope that it can help students to deal with the vast array of media messages, services and tools which they encounter every day. It can help them to understand the context in which these things have been developed, who offers them, and why; and can encourage students to use the services and tools in adventurous ways.

At university level, media courses are often oriented towards ‘getting a job in the media’. This is less straightforward than it used to be, compounded by the fact that media employers often say that they don’t necessarily want someone who has ‘only’ studied the media, and would be happier with a specialist in History, English Literature, or Physics – someone who ‘knows something about something’.

Furthermore, ‘the media’ is not so easily identified these days. This can be to our students’ benefit, as media production is no longer simply about a job in TV or newspapers, but might involve being employed by a charity to create online games or videos to raise awareness of an issue, or by a museum to make an engaging, educational app for a mobile phone, or – the list could go on indefinitely – a very wide range of other possibilities.

So we can encourage students to develop their media production skills, and to critically understand the context in which those skills might be deployed; and we should cater, equally, to those who may not be doing hands-on production but might be involved in media development, analysis, or strategy. Personally I’m not necessarily convinced that an undergraduate degree is the ideal container for such activity; studying Sociology, Philosophy, or Economics might be better for you, in terms of stretching your learning, thinking, and understanding of the world. The media skills and analysis you can learn yourself, or perhaps do an MA later. But let’s leave that aside for now, since Media courses not only exist, but are in demand. How can we make them work best for our students?

Here are six suggestions.

1: Hands-on, Do It Yourself learning

I believe that people most often enjoy themselves, make connections, and therefore learn, when they are doing things. This learning can grow with reflection, discussion, and writing, but it begins with the doing. This was confirmed by the research I did for my book Making is Connecting (2011), which shows that through the process of making things, we arrive at understandings which are not just about the apparent ‘subject matter’ of the production, but are about one’s own feelings and reflections. Making things leads to insights into the creative process, and the ways in which
created things become situated in the context of the world. Even more importantly, perhaps, making things enables people to make connections with each other, and to feel more engaged in their own learning process.

This means that traditional lectures, seminars, and essays don’t work very well. The teaching events tend to be rather isolated and do not require great amounts of participation; and when we ask for, say, two 3,000 word essays, this tends to drive attention towards two particular topics for two quite brief periods, rather than inviting a sustained engagement with learning every week.

It would be better, I think, if students were expected to regularly create artefacts – such as YouTube videos and blog posts – that they place on a kind of virtual landscape, in response to issues and questions raised in workshops and other learning events, and by each others' tweets, blogs, videos, and ideas. One ‘view’ of this landscape, for assessment purposes, would consist of their individual works, but the more common ‘view’ would be the collaborative work of each student cohort – a much more rich dialogue than the brief, weekly seminar. By representing learning as an ongoing and evolving process, with regular interaction and collaboration, rather than as an input–output machine which leads to two essay products, we can make learning more rich, engaging, and meaningful.

**2: Creativity as the core**

Creativity has to be the most important element in every part of a media course or degree. An eye for quality and professionalism is important, too, but not at the expense of ideas, innovation and character. The culture of Web 2.0 prompts a return to the ethos of the Victorian philosopher and critic John Ruskin, who argued that the roughly-made and non-professional things made by everyday people were the most valuable and meaningful elements of our culture, as they embody a kind of celebration of humanity’s imperfections: the very fact that we are not machines.

Ruskin argued that human creativity should be unleashed, and must dare to risk failure and shame, so that the richness of humanity can be properly expressed. Today we have the tools to easily experiment, and to share our haphazard innovations with others. We should push ourselves in the direction of diverse and unusual experimentation, rather than the risk-averse version of ‘professionalism’ which prefers bland competence.

Of course, our students must know how to make things well, but then should want to push harder towards the innovative and unfamiliar. Media Studies courses cannot just show how to make a video, website or article of acceptable quality; rather they should be asking how we can *rethink* entertainment or information experiences to make them more useful, stimulating, and engaging.

**3: Social engagement**
These days, many people find that they can make media, without too much trouble or expense, and do it just because they can. Learning in Media Studies therefore needs to stretch students well above this baseline, so that they can produce work which has greater quality, thoughtfulness and style, and in particular that is meaningful. Work that has a point. If a media course is to ‘add value’ to the learning and experience of students, it must include a social and ethical dimension.

Students should be encouraged to think about the meanings of everything that they do. We must ask: What do we want to do in the world? What kind of things would we like to stimulate? What unintended consequences might there be?

A focus on the meaningful and sociological side of Media Studies also means that we are required to discourage the self-indulgent and pointless textual analysis which was once central to the average Media Studies textbook. Occasionally some commentators do manage to make interesting observations about the composition or meaning of a particular culturally significant text. But requiring our students to make pretentious statements about trivial aspects of unimportant bits of media content was always a silly idea, and bound to draw sharp and reasonable attacks from critics of the discipline. The defence that this activity is parallel to what they do in literature studies was correct, but it’s often a waste of time there too. Our students should at least have the ambition to be on the front line of creative activity – not following along behind, making comments to an audience of no one.

4: Critical but intelligent

Students should be encouraged to be intelligently critical, which means that they should be judicious: sharply critical, where relevant, but also able to see the positive or appealing side of things, where relevant. The academic fashion for believing that the ‘correct’ diagnosis of any phenomenon is the most disapproving one does not help anybody: being intelligently critical is more-or-less the opposite of being automatically miserable.

In order to be intelligently critical, it is not necessarily the case that students need to be able to do an impersonation of the jargon-laden and usually rather banal tools of Cultural Studies. To be in a position to make genuinely insightful critiques, students need to gain a good understanding of how things work: partly from having the experience of making and sharing media themselves, and partly from learning – through their own research – about how companies like Google, Facebook and the BBC operate. How are these organisations funded, and how does this affect what they do? What are their aims, and why, for example, do they do some things which lose money? How do they really see the people who use their products – as individuals or a mass, as advertising sales or potential subscribers, as consumers or participants? And what difference does this make?

5: The return of ideas
Media courses today have often de-emphasised ‘theory’, and even renamed those former areas of the course as ‘analysis’ or ‘contextual studies’, to indicate this shift. This is typically a response to the excesses of Cultural Studies-type theory of the 1980s and 1990s, as indicated above, which tended to have little connection with the experiences of actual media users or producers.

Meanwhile, however, ideas about media and communication are on the public agenda like never before. Online connectivity and social media has led to a significant surge of interest in what we can do with media, now that electronic media is suddenly something that lots of people can do something with. This can be seen in several best-selling books – those by Clay Shirky and Charles Leadbeater, for instance – as well as conversations that can be seen every day on Twitter.

The best discussions of the implications of new technologies and new kinds of media occur, for obvious reasons, when participants really know what they are talking about. This reinforces the previous point: sharp conceptual insights need to be built on a concrete understanding of how things work. That’s why, for example, Jaron Lanier’s critique of Web 2.0 in *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010) is so provocative – whether you agree with him or not – because he is one of the internet pioneers, with a thorough understanding of how technology works and what it can do, allied with a philosopher’s eye for substantial concepts about identity and personhood.

By encouraging our students to engage with ideas – about human creativity, individuality and community – as well as a keen critical perspective and a thorough understanding of how things work in media technologies and industries, we can truly equip them for thinking intelligently about the present and the future.

**6: Tools for thinking and making**

Ultimately, Media Studies should encourage creative thinking and creative making. It is at its best when it is about encouraging people to think (and, correspondingly, at its worst when it tries to tell people what to think).

Media Studies should give people the tools – or help them to invent the tools – which will foster creative exchange between individuals and groups. The ability to express ourselves, and to make our mark on the world, is crucial to a healthy society. Our students, then, need to be able to do this for themselves, but it should not be exclusive to them: they must also be able to foster this in others.

As Ivan Illich wrote in *Tools for Conviviality* (1973), ‘People need not only to obtain things, they need above all the freedom to make things among which they can live, to give shape to them according to their own tastes, and to put them to use in caring for and about others’. As electronic media moves well beyond the consumer ‘have what you’re given’ model of the twentieth century, towards a much healthier ecosystem where media-making is just as much a part of everyday life as media-
receiving, Media Studies has to be about understanding the tools, using the tools, and making new tools, for meaningful personal and community purposes.

Some Reading


Burgess, Jean, & Green, Joshua (2009), *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*, Cambridge: Polity.


